

Information Architecture Basics

INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE 101

This is a distillation of information gathered from IA training, usability training, and best practices research to help you get a handle on what you need to rearchitect your website. You will be asked to provide the following as prerequisites to the IA process:

- a business case
- user types
- information domains specific to your site

Then you can apply best practices and use taxonomy creation tools to build out your site.

WHAT IS INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE?

IA is the organization of information on a website, in such a way as to transform content into understandable and discoverable information. IA includes:

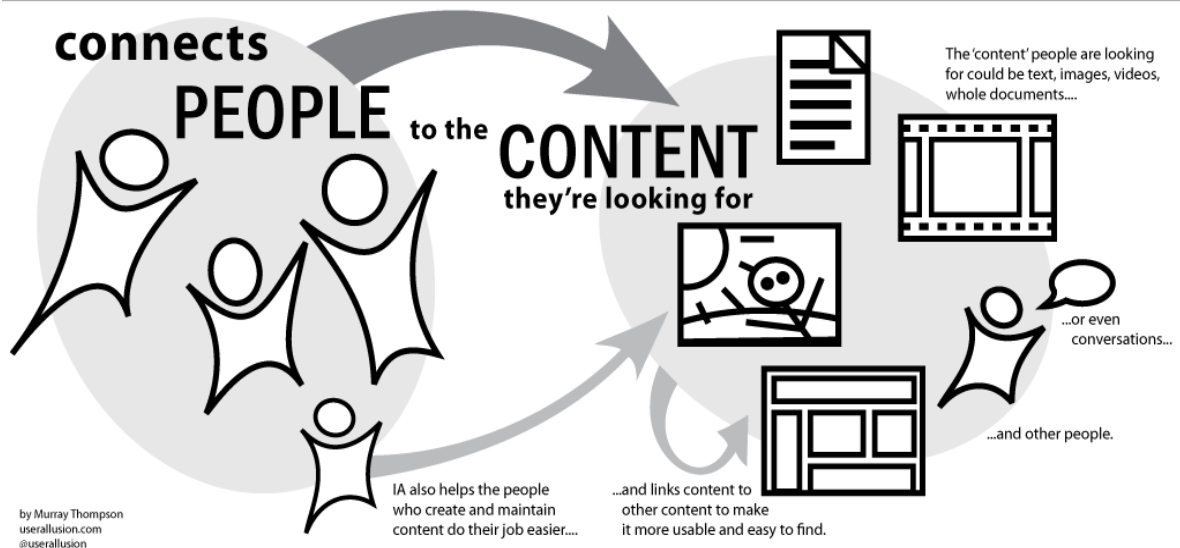
- structure
- content
- labeling
- categorization
- navigation
- search

by sorting out things like this:



INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

(IA for short)



WHAT IS THE BENEFIT OF INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE?

The goal of IA is to organize information so that it is **findable**, **manageable**, and **usable**. Good information architecture makes it easy for users to find information on your website. A common analogy applies: Just as you wouldn't consider building a house without a set of architectural plans, so you shouldn't develop a website without information architecture.

Organizations must realize that users may represent multiple audiences, and that each audience may perceive their content in a different way. The steps/tools listed here will help identify how content on your site should be labeled, organized, navigated and searched in order to best serve the different audiences that use it.

WHAT DOES AN INFORMATION ARCHITECT DO?

An information architect has training in organizing and structuring content. They can help:

- Facilitate group discussion of business case and top-level organization
- Develop taxonomy (topics or other types of organization)
- Analyze content
- Train in metadata application and other best practices of site organization and labeling, as well as search engine optimization
- Develop customized search interface
- Provide direction and feedback as site develops

An information architect takes into account issues concerning content, users and business context as they impact the information design. An information architect may specialize in thesaurus design, metadata and classification. Specialists in classification are referred to as taxonomists.

INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE VS. VISUAL DESIGN

An information architect is not responsible for the graphic design of your website; an IA develops the information design. Visual design should follow the development of the IA, in order to leverage the best practices of both disciplines and optimize the user experience.

PREREQUISITES TO THE IA PROCESS

Take some time to identify your website's business case, customer types, and information domains. These three things will serve as the foundation of your site's IA.

1. Business Case

Every website needs to have a driving force, the business case. You can adapt your organization's case or create one just for the website's purpose. The website business case needs to be specific so that you can draw ideas from it for the structure of the site. It also allows you to update your site in a way that logically fits into the business needs.

2. Customer Types

Identify the customer groups that use or will use your website. The 3 obvious types are:

- Agency/division employees (internal or external)
- Businesses
- Citizens

In addition to these, consider other big users such as:

- program managers
- federal government agencies
- non-profit groups, etc.

The purposes of identifying customer types are:

- to help with site organization;
- to provide a user-oriented taxonomy (see Taxonomies below for further explanation)
- to keep in mind the user expectations while building out your site

3. Information Domains

Identify the caches of information that you will provide on your website. This can often aid in developing the approach to organization (see Taxonomies below). Examples include:

- Publications
- Content on a particular topic, such as Licensing
- Content geared toward a particular audience, such as Educators

ORGANIZATIONAL ELEMENTS OF A WEBSITE

- Themes/categorization: clustering of items into groups
- Labeling/naming: labels or names used to describe the groups
- Navigation: topic categorization, labels, or other tools to navigate the site

These 3 elements are interrelated and therefore impact each other as decisions are made.

TAXONOMIES

Users may well benefit from multiple approaches to your web information. Here is an example of 3 types of taxonomies that you should consider for your website:

1. Themes/topics:

A hierarchical approach to the topical information on your site, starting with large top-level categories (themes) and becoming more granular in a logical way. In many content management systems, these themes are located on the top navigation bar and typically open out on the left-hand navigation as the user clicks through to narrower topics. As an example, see the themes on the Minnesota state portal (mn.gov).

2. Audiences:

A customer-oriented approach to your services or web documents. As an example, see DHS's user-oriented top-level categories (mn.gov/dhs).

3. Specialized Listings:

Consider drop-down lists of programs, services, documents or forms that are appropriate to your user base. Examples:

- a. Minnesota Department of Health – Diseases and Conditions listing

<http://www.health.state.mn.us/macros/topics/diseases.html>

- b. Minnesota Department of Public Safety – click on Divisions menu

<https://dps.mn.gov/Pages/default.aspx>

Your site is unique! You might have other listings that your users expect such as documents arranged chronologically, documents by information type (news releases, policies, meeting minutes), or a linear approach to projects.

4. A-Z topics:

Users who don't find what they are seeking in the hierarchical themes/topics (see #1 above) will benefit from an alphabetical listing of all topics. Examples:

- a. License Minnesota

http://mn.gov/elicense/az_indexes/licensebytopic.jsp#term_Accountants

- b. Disability Minnesota

http://www.mndisability.gov/public/content.do?letter=a&action=terms&term_id=162

- c. IRRRB

<http://mn.gov/irrrb/a-z-index/index.jsp>

5. Other Navigational Elements:

Include such things as Search (usually in the header), How Do I (if used), an expanded footer, policies (often linked from the footer), etc.

BEST PRACTICES FOR SITE ORGANIZATION

1. Themes/Topics

- Optimum number of top-level themes is 5-7.
- Theme names should be short and descriptive.
- Themes/topics should be topic-oriented; don't mix user types, programs, and topics.
- Keep topics at the same conceptual level in the hierarchy; don't mix broad topics with very narrow ones.
- Do not recreate your org chart as a navigational scheme. If your users need to know your organizational hierarchy, provide as a content item and link from the footer.

Other Approaches to Your Information

Provide multiple approaches to your information, including:

- audience orientation (information geared to specific user types)
- services/programs
- other appropriate listings (see "Specialized Listings" under Taxonomies above.)

Inspiration

- Look at similar sites for ideas.
- Remember, you are looking for appropriate themes, other taxonomies, good terminology, navigational ease, design ideas.

2. Site Structure

The last product following above website organizational decision-making is the snapshot of the site. There are several way to present this view:

- **A-Z Index:**
A very usable approach which is often built dynamically. Thought needs to be given to the nomenclature when building this list.
- **Theme/topic organization:**
This shows the entire topic hierarchy, blown out to full form.
- **Multiple taxonomies:**
This type of site map shows the full theme/topics as above and also adds other taxonomies such as "Services" and "Customer Types."
- **Table of contents (traditional Site Map):**
This type used to be the most common. It includes links to the website's information in outline form. *It is no longer recommended or commonly used.*